

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #472

Subject: Lois White

Place: Harney County Library, Burns, Oregon

Date: March 16, 2010

Interviewer: Ken Peckham

KEN: This is Ken Peckham. Today is March 16, 2010. I'm speaking with Lois White because... in the Oral History Room at the Harney County Library. And I think we're ready to start here. When did you first come to Harney County?

LOIS: I came to Harney County in August of 1957. I was hired by Henry Slater who was then principal at the elementary school here. He had sent me a telegram in Minnesota—I am from Minnesota. And I received this telegram from Henry Slater asking me if I was interested in a position to teach elementary school music, in Burns, Oregon. At the time, the salary was much better than it was in Minnesota. I was going to be paid a full \$3,000 for the year! And I thought wow, I want to go to Oregon. So I wired him back and said, "Yes, I would be glad to come and accept the position of elementary music teacher." There was no interview, there was no application, and there were no references. I just got on the train and came in about August 20 of 1957. I was—he arranged for me to meet another school teacher from North Dakota who got on the train at Jamestown. I had gotten on at Fargo, North Dakota. We met on the train and we both bought train tickets clear through to Burns. Well, Mr. Slater realized that the train probably shouldn't take us all the way to Burns so he fortunately met us in Ontario. And he informed us that you could ride the train to Burns but it was a logging train, and it was a tri-weekly train. And he says this train comes in one week, and it tries to go out the next (laughter). So we got to Burns. It was night time. I lost my directions, and I'm still confused in my directions. I'm a quarter turned around—I can't get north, east, south, and west straight in Burns, Oregon. Because in Minnesota, roads run straight, like a gridlock—north, south, east, west. Anyhow,

that first night he put us... the next morning he took us to the house that he rented for us. He had made arrangements, rented a little house and he took us there where we got settled in. It was furnished, fortunately, because in those days I came on the train with two suitcases. Not a stay. There was two cots, so we slept in the health room at Slater Elementary. Haul trucks full of stuff (laughter).

KEN: That's right.

LOIS: And then, so he proceeded to introduce us to our landlady who was Vella McQueen. And there is more to the story coming later—Vella McQueen. Then he took us down to the local grocery store, arranged for us to have a charge account for our groceries, arranged with Vella to pay our rent when we got our first paycheck. We were broke, we had no money. I came, you know, with \$10 in my pocket.

KEN: What grocery store did you go to?

LOIS: It was on Main Street, and I believe it was Homer Richey's grocery store on Main Street, right now where Trent Tiller's Floors-To-Go is.

KEN: Really.

LOIS: And so we had a charge account until we got our first paycheck so we could eat. Things were different.

KEN: They were.

LOIS: So, then, yeah... so that is how I proceeded to get started and then, you know, got familiar with the school within a week or so, then... begin my teaching career as an elementary school teacher. We had two classes at once. There wasn't such a thing as having one classroom come in to music. You had at least two at a time so there was probably at least fifty kids—fifty or sixty kids in the classroom at one time.

KEN: Classrooms ran around twenty-five to thirty kids?

LOIS: Right. Right, and so, yeah, it was a big full classroom. And I think I didn't get to know all their names (laughter). I didn't have a car, and that was the year that the Washington school and the Fillmore school had just opened. And so the music teacher needed to go down and do music at the

Washington school and the Fillmore school. I didn't even have a car. So Mr. Slater drove me every Tuesday and Thursday down to each of those schools, picked me up and took me back to Slater for the rest of the day. So, yes, we made do, we absolutely made do, and I enjoyed it immensely. I loved having all those kids sing—we just sang. I'm not sure we did a lot of other teaching, but we sang. And so that was my first year teaching music in Harney County.

KEN: And that was in 1957?

LOIS: That was the '57-'58 school year. At the end of the year he wanted me to come back for the next school year, but by that time I was married. I met my husband, Don White, oh, about a month after I got to Burns. I had come to the Baptist Church, and of course, they had me playing the piano, and so he saw me and wanted to get to know me and we took it from there. Dale and Joanna introduced us, because he was too bashful to come and make himself known, if anybody can imagine that (laughter).

KEN: No.

LOIS: And so we were married at Christmas time. We wouldn't—I arrived in August, I met him September 20th, we were married December 20th of that same year. My parents took the train out to Portland. They took the bus down from Portland to here for our wedding. And we were married here at the First Baptist Church. By springtime I was pregnant. And so, of course, I told Mr. Slater there is no way—I mean I'm pregnant, I'm going to have a baby, there is no way I will teach anymore. I mean, that was it, I was going to be dedicated to raising a family. So, that's how I got started (laughter). And for the next, I guess close to ten years, I basically raised children. I had four. And during that time I did give a few piano lessons, a few times I did give piano lessons. So, that's how I got started in Harney County, and why I have stayed. I married the cowboy, and here I am (laughter). And then about ten years later, no maybe eight years later—I'm not sure what year it was, they got me to teach one year down at Crane. I had, let's see, I had four children at that time so it had to be in about... It was the year the school burned. The Crane school burned, I think it must have been about eight years—maybe in about '66 or somewhere. Anyhow, I was the music teacher at Crane. They, you

know, they had to get me a special certificate because, of course, in those days you want all certified. But all the superintendent had to do was write to the state department and get a years' certificate and it worked. So I went to Crane when I had four children, just to teach that one year, because they were hurting for a teacher. I taught elementary music, I taught high school choir, I taught high school band, and I taught girls P.E. and journalism. I mean that is what you did when you went to Crane (laughter).

KEN: Was it a boarding school then?

LOIS: It was a boarding school then, yes. And the whole... the dorms and the whole school burned in January that year. Everything except the music building, it was an extra little white building. It was the music room. And it did not burn, so we still had our instruments.

KEN: Good.

LOIS: So, we had the instruments, and by spring time—of course then we had to have a concert, which we did out on the football field on the bleachers. We had no gym, and we had nothing. But after the school burned in January, it was only down about two weeks and we took up school again, making do. We made do in little buildings around the area, except we had our music building so I still had band and I still had choir. And it was the most interesting year.

KEN: Sure. Oh, dear.

LOIS: Okay, so that was my teaching in the early years, until I got started later on. So it was... then back in that time was when I got involved, besides teaching piano lessons when my children were little—the very first effort was made at establishing a chamber music society. And it didn't get really off the ground. But, like I said, Sally Heerwagon, Suzie Smith, and there was someone else, wanted to bring in some classical musicians to Harney County. And somehow I was involved in the raising money, or selling tickets, or something, that we were trying to bring some good music to Harney County.

KEN: Do you recall....?

LOIS: And I don't remember what groups they were. I don't remember who else was involved, but this had to have been in about, like, say... in '68, '70. I'm not sure. Early '70s probably. Early '70s,

because I got the prize for being most energetic or sold the most tickets, or raised the most money... I don't remember even what.

KEN: Brought people in.

LOIS: It brought people in. Buy anyhow, so the prize was a dinner out at the Arrowhead Hotel, which of course burned down several years later. You probably don't even remember the Arrowhead Hotel.

KEN: No, I don't.

LOIS: I mean, that was the place to eat, was at the Arrowhead Hotel. It was right there on that open lot on Main Street, where they put the Christmas tree every year.

KEN: That was.... Okay... They called it the Arrowhead lot?

LOIS: I think it was the Arrowhead lot, it was the Arrowhead Hotel.

KEN: Yeah.

LOIS: And my prize for doing this was dinner for two at the Arrowhead Hotel. It was considered *the* place to eat. And I remember the feeling-- Don and I went to have dinner by ourselves. I had four children by that time, and I think this was the first night we had gone out by ourselves to eat dinner. And thought wow! No children (laughter). But I felt lost (laughter). So that was the very beginning of the Chamber Music Society, where—then, of course, it was later on when you came, where it started in earnest. But that was some of the early beginnings.

KEN: ...

LOIS: Yeah, it was before that.

KEN: ...

LOIS: Okay. Oh, okay, so it had to be several years before that. It was an empty lot when you came. I don't have the year it burned, but it burned down too.

KEN: ...

LOIS: You check on that, yes.

KEN: You can check on the dates (laughter).

LOIS: So, yeah, that was my beginning. Okay, then it was after I taught one year at Crane, then I

didn't go back to teaching again until our oldest started college. Well, by that time Mom has to go back to work because there has to be money for kids to go to college.

KEN: That's right.

LOIS: By that time we had five of them. And so the year of '79 I went back to teaching, and I believe it was the year after Ethel Johnson retired.

KEN: '79-'80, was the first year...

LOIS: '79, '80. Yes, '79, '80 was about it. Because that was when I went back. And then between '79-'80 school year and 2000-- I actually officially retired in the year 2000—no, 1990. Because I only taught for eleven years. It was '79-1990.

KEN: The spring of 1990.

LOIS: The spring of 1990. So I did eleven. I did an eleven year stretch there, alternating between elementary school and high school, wherever they kind of put me. So then I officially retired in 1990 from teaching high school. And then spent the next ten years substituting.

KEN: That's right.

LOIS: And, right. So I actually spent as much time substituting...

KEN: As you did teaching.

LOIS: As I did teaching (laughter). So that's basically my school career. So... and during that time then, I suppose I was involved a little bit with the Chamber Music.

KEN: Then, you did direct the choir?

LOIS: I did... directed the choir a couple of years. I don't remember exactly when that was, but there was a couple years there I directed the Chamber Choir. It was during that time when I was actually teaching, I think, so I was kind of in the know (laughter). It's funny how much we lose when you get out of the...

KEN: So you were at the high school teaching the choir?

LOIS: I believe I was. When I was doing the Chamber music, because I remember having access to the music room and all that.

KEN: Right.

LOIS: And so, but I just have no idea what years those were.

KEN: I'm tracking back in my memory and it's like...

LOIS: Yeah, I don't know. It was...

KEN: Don Calvert was the first teacher I remember having at the high school.

LOIS: Yes. Yes, he was there several years.

KEN: And then following him was...?

LOIS: Was it Eric Smith?

KEN: I am going to say it was Eric Smith.

LOIS: I believe... I think so.

KEN: And then it was—no, Martin had took it over when they were cutting music people.

LOIS: Yes.

KEN: They were doing both band and choir in...

LOIS: Okay, okay...

KEN: And then... Dean... must have come...

LOIS: No, he was after me. I was between... because Dean Presley came in after I did, so...

KEN: I took over the high school band after...Martin

LOIS: Okay, so you took over the band—must have been about the same time that I took over the choir. Because we kind of worked together on a lot of programs.

KEN: Yes, we did.

LOIS: So, it must have been about that same time (laughter) because Dean Freeson came...

KEN: That was '85.

LOIS: It was in the '80s, yeah. I think it was about '85 to '90. I think I was about five years at the high school. Before that I was at the elementary. And during that—okay, before I went back in '79, of course, I had to get my certificate updated because I had been, you know, those early years was just on a provisional certificate, which you could do then. Things weren't nearly as complicated

(laughter). Buy anyhow, in order to go back full time when my kids started college in '79 I had to go to the University of Oregon. I went winter term... must have been the winter of '78 or '79. I had gone over and got lined out. I went the winter term at the University of Oregon. I took nineteen hours so I could get my certificate updated. So I drove home every weekend during that winter on snowy roads from Eugene. I drove every Sunday night, and I would come home most of the time on either Thursday night or Friday morning because I could manage to get my classes all in four days. And so, then I would come home and get my family lined out, and then go back. So I did ten weeks of driving over snowy roads to Eugene during winter. But then I got my certificate updated. And... but you know, did what I had to do to get it (laughter). So, we survived, you know. And the family survived, and by that time Charlotte and Joe were seniors in high school then. So yeah, you know. They were kept... with Don and the little boys. And Curt was in college by that time, so that's one reason I had to go back to work.

KEN: Those are milestone... on the kids.

LOIS: Yes, that's definitely...

KEN: That's how we do with Mary, you know.

LOIS: Right, that's milestones, uh-huh. You know where they are by what you were doing (laughter).

KEN: Exactly. So you directed the Chamber Music choir, I know that.

LOIS: Right.

KEN: And we're not sure of the date.

LOIS: And I don't remember because... What year did you do the Hallelujah Chorus?

KEN: That would be...

LOIS: The would be something you could... right, it was like two years I had... think I directed the Chamber chorus the two years prior to that because then when we did the Hallelujah Chorus I did the rehearsal, but then you directed the whole thing.

KEN: That's right.

LOIS: It was a magnificent production.

KEN: Two years in a row, I think. Or three years in a row.

LOIS: I believe we did, yeah. Because we...

KEN: We took it one year up to John Day.

LOIS: Because it was a very talented group.

KEN: Yes, it was.

LOIS: A very talented group. And so we were able to...

KEN: It came right after... when the mill went down.

LOIS: Yes, okay.

KEN: In '81 or so.

LOIS: Okay.

KEN: Is that right?

LOIS: Sounds pretty close in there. So I had done, I think... I had directed the actual singing of the Chamber choir two years prior to when you did the Hallelujah, or did the Messiah. So that was my... basically, my last involvement, I think, with the Chamber music. And then when I retired and went to substituting then I really wasn't as involved in community music. And through all this time I had been of course, basically involved with doing the choir work at the Faith Baptist Church. From the time I arrived, and you know, and off and on between having babies and takings some time off, basically had directed the choirs, as long as we had choirs in church.

KEN: Right.

LOIS: Until the last few years, of course, there hasn't been anything. But I basically was involved with the choir and the instrumental program at the church.

KEN: Accompaniment...services.

LOIS: Right, right, right. Directed the choir from the piano is basically what I did. And for several years we had, you know, some good talent, and it worked.

KEN: Yes. And you came back and taught choir in 2000, I believe?

LOIS: Oh, yes I did. You're right. After...

KEN: Amber. Amber Culbertson.

LOIS: Yes, right. She had been there for one year. And then what had happened...

KEN: One year...

LOIS: Right. That's right. Because that was... and then they had hired somebody else to do choir, but she lasted only the first day of teacher in-service, and then she left.

KEN: That's right.

LOIS: Because they called me the night before school started and wanted to know if I could fill in, and ... okay.

KEN: Okay.

LOIS: Kids are coming in the morning.

KEN: I have good preparation time.

LOIS: That's preparation time. Yes, that's right, and that was my yes slot. I started a few days, and pretty soon it was obvious they weren't going to get anybody else. So I said well I would agree to teach that year. And that was a terribly stressful year, because I had four performance groups. I had the choir at the high school, I had the drama at the high school, I had the choir at the junior high, and I had the drama at the junior high. Because the teacher they had hired was a drama person, so this was already in the...

KEN: Already in place.

LOIS: In place. Never having done anything in the drama field except for doing children's musicals, which I was glad I had done in elementary school because that was my experience with drama, was doing children's musicals. So that year we had those four performance groups, and we pulled it off. I'm not sure how (laughter). But by the end of the year, I was so tired. And by that time, yeah, I was sixty-five years old. And I said this is it. No more substituting any more. That was it!

KEN: You were done.

LOIS: I was done (laughter). Since then I have just been enjoying grandkids and doing a little, you

know, piano playing. I've done a lot of playing, especially funerals, weddings, that sort of thing, you know. But that's basically it, you know. And I don't teach anything anymore. I have grandkids to take care of, but I have myself to take care of (laughter). And a ranch, and a husband, and that's plenty.

KEN: Now, you were involved in musicals in the high school level too, weren't you?

LOIS: Oh, yes. There was one year when... who was the director? That drama/choir person? We did "Sound of Music." Were you here then?

KEN: Yes.

LOIS: Eric Smith was soloist, was the lead man, and Mary Lemos was Mary-- or Maria. Maria. Mary Lemos was Maria. Yes. I was involved with that-- accompanying on the piano basically was my job with that. But that was very interesting. Yes, that was a fun production. I think that's the only one I was involved in. I think they did "Oliver" another year. I think. Who was the fellow that was the director?

KEN: ...

LOIS: No.

KEN: No, that was "Music Man."

LOIS: Okay.

KEN: You did "Music Man" the first year that I was here.

LOIS: Okay. Okay, okay. I wasn't involved with that one. But there was a drama teacher that was doing "The Sound of Music." He was an English teacher at the high school and I don't remember his name.

KEN: I don't either. Another thing to look up.

LOIS: Yes, okay. There you are.

KEN: I know we did "Oliver." I think it was 1977, the year my daughter was...

LOIS: Okay.

KEN: And I was with the orchestra.

LOIS: Okay. And I was not involved with those. The only one I was involved with was “The Sound of Music.” Yes. So... that’s my story (laughter).

KEN: Well, Eric Smith was the director of the choirs in the high school and...

LOIS: Yes, yes. Yes, he was. Because you were at the junior high.

KEN: I was...

LOIS: It was still those years when we had about three different districts, and before they merged it all into one.

KEN: Exactly, yes.

LOIS: Right. Things have changed.

KEN: They have changed.

LOIS: They have changed, yes.

KEN: Having the mill going down changed a lot of things.

LOIS: Yes, that changed the community a lot. Because then you dropped out and went to work at the mill... for how long?

KEN: Three years.

LOIS: Three years. Okay.

KEN: It was 1989 through ’92.

LOIS: Okay, okay. And then when your Mary started high school you went back to teaching, is that right?

KEN: Yes.

LOIS: Because then she started with the high school band, right? It’s funny how our children have a tendency to dictate what we do.

KEN: Dictate what we do. Isn’t that amazing?

LOIS: And then... grandchildren (laughter). So that’s kind of where I come from.

KEN: Where did you go to school?

LOIS: I went to school at Northwestern College at Minneapolis, Minnesota, as a Christian, non-

denominational college. It was where Billy Graham originated from when he started his crusades. He was the president of that college. And it was that student body, they prayed him out into the evangelistic field. He went from there, starting from his first crusades. And it was a fabulous music school. And the reason I came to Oregon, really, was because while I was at college we had a fabulous choir and music program. And we took... and my sophomore year at college we took a tour clear out to the West. We went to Portland, Salem, and I think back through Bend... but I'm not... I don't remember. I know we went around The Dalles, Pendleton, Portland, Salem, and I'm thinking we must have come back through Bend and Burns, but I don't remember, because we went from Oregon back to Salt Lake City, so we could hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

KEN: You almost have to go through Burns...

LOIS: We almost had to have gone through Burns. And it just... but I don't recall those days of college kids and being on the bus. But I said then I would love to come back to Oregon. I just loved it. Just from that... because coming from Minnesota, I would love to have come back to Oregon. And so when I got this chance in this telegram to come to Oregon I just jumped on it, because I had been here, just enough to whet my appetite that I wanted to come back West.

KEN: ...come back...

LOIS: In fact, one of my classmates from Oregon was from over there at Salem, and he come to visit us, oh, several years later after we were married and settled in. And he says when I told you to go to Oregon, I didn't mean this part of Oregon (laughter). Because people from the valley have a tendency to think we don't really exist over here.

KEN: That's right.

LOIS: Over here... But I think it's really...

KEN: It's been that way a long time.

LOIS: It's been that way a long time. But we surprise them with how much musical activity we have here.

KEN: Yes. While you were at the high school, teaching those years at the high school, did you have

to...?

LOIS: The only one I had was Ann Beale, a soprano singer, and I believe... she didn't. I didn't have anybody involved in the All-Northwest type of thing. But in the solo competition... she was in the solo competition. She went to state in the solo competition. And that's... I think, the only...

KEN: She's a phenomenal singer.

LOIS: Phenomenal singer, yes.

KEN: And still is.

LOIS: So yes, I was one... I did... she was my prodigy I guess you might say as far as soloists were concerned. So that was fun.

KEN: And you had kids involved in the district choir?

LOIS: Oh, yes. Right, district choir. We did several there into district competition. So we have a... always a good time to encourage solo participation. So we did that. That was fun. So, anyhow (laughter)...

KEN: I learned so much.

LOIS: Well, I guess that's what this is for?

KEN: That's what it's for. That's what it's for. Do you have some pictures here that we could...?

LOIS: Well, I don't know what you want for pictures. I couldn't find anything. This is one of me playing the piano at some time or another that I had cut out and put on a Christmas card.

KEN: In this?

LOIS: Yes, just me. And I thought I was on this picture, but I'm not. And see... I... this is, I don't know, this was my last year-- the 1990 swing choir, and they gave me this. So I don't know if you could replicate that, or take a photograph?

KEN: I'm sure that we can, yeah. Karen can do that here.

LOIS: Right, so... but that is all. I couldn't find anything. A... involved with kids, and I'm not even in this picture. This is just from the choir to me.

KEN: ...

LOIS: Yes. Yes, that was my last year of full time teaching, back in 1990. That was the year when we had the swing choir. The biggest thing was the swing choir, and we would go to Newport to the festival every April. And that was the big highlight—going to the Newport Swing Choir Festival. That was lots of fun, and the kids loved it. And that was my last swing choir. So, that's all I have. I couldn't find anything else.

KEN: Well, I'm glad you came to do this. I appreciate your time. I appreciate your efforts, and I appreciate your musicology.

LOIS: Okay. Thank you (laughter).

KEN: This has been fun.

LOIS: This has been something else. Okay. I dredge up memories that I don't ... you know, you forget about...

KEN: Yes.

LOIS: Until you start talking about them.

KEN: It is. One leads to another.

LOIS: One leads to another. Right.

End of recording

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